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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: MELES ALTERS STANCE ON MILITARY ACTION  
ON SOMALIA

REF: A. ADDIS 3212  
[B](#). ADDIS 3211  
[C](#). ADDIS 3162  
[D](#). ADDIS 3206

Classified By: AMBASSADOR DONALD YAMAMOTO FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D

[1](#). (C) Summary: Recent U.S. visitors to Ethiopia have advocated a message of caution to Prime Minister Meles and raised potential consequences of Ethiopian deployment of troops in possible military action in Somalia. While Meles has consistently underscored the threat of al-Shabaab and other extremist elements of the Council Islamic Courts (CIC) to regional stability, and the seemingly inevitable nature of military conflict, Meles recently altered his message and noted to us that his forces will "take their time," carefully analyzing the situation in Somalia. However, he told us that CIC attacks on the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in Baidoa would prompt an immediate reaction by Ethiopia in defense of the TFG.

[2](#). (C) Meles argues that extremist elements are taking control of the CIC and must be dealt with now before they are too strong, potentially destabilizing the regional states. Meles sees IGASOM as essential in protecting the TFG, moderating the CIC threat, and supporting moderates within the CIC. But he does not see IGASOM as an immediate reality, and thus Ethiopia will need to take short military actions jointly with forces from the TFG, Somaliland and Puntland. This will be necessary, Meles argues, to keep al-Shabaabs and extremist elements "off-balance" until an IGASOM force can be deployed.

[3](#). (C) COMMENT: While the extremist elements of the CIC pose a clear and significant threat to Ethiopia and regional states, Meles faces the equally challenging threat of internal instability from ethnic tensions, local elections next April, and demands for political reform. The next several months will see serious challenges to Meles' government as he deals simultaneously with the external security threat and internal political situation. End Summary.

A Tale of Caution  
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[4](#). (C) In five meetings with Prime Minister Meles and separate meetings with Foreign Minister Seyoum and ENDF Chief

of Staff General Samora during the week of November 27, the Ambassador and U.S. visitors, including General Abizaïd and Senator Feingold, raised the need for Ethiopia to be cautious in taking any action in Somalia. General Abizaïd articulated that Meles had time on his side and that a rush into conflict would yield immediate victories against "technicals" (foot soldiers), but not enhance security for Ethiopia. Senator Feingold raised potential consequences of any action in Somalia. General Samora noted to us that there was no "massing of troops" by the CIC. The al-Shabaab were operating in small units, along with their foreign supporters, particularly the Eritreans, who have supplied several hundred advisors/trainers, according to the Ethiopian military. The lack of a clear target would make any conventional combat operations potentially difficult. Meles noted that small unit tactics would be effective in neutralizing the CIC extremists and their foreign supporters.

15. (C) In a shift in approach, Meles told us December 6 that military action against al-Shabaab units and other CIC forces would not be immediate. He said he would "take time" to fully analyze the situation in Somalia. He stated, however, that an attack by the CIC against the TFG would elicit an immediate response by Ethiopia and other forces from Somaliland, Puntland and the TFG to keep the TFG from collapsing.

#### Self-Defense -- Fending off Terrorism

16. (C) Prime Minister Meles and Foreign Minister Seyoum have clearly articulated that extremist elements are taking over the CIC through intimidation and threats. As noted in a UN

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report, support from Eritrean advisors as well as assistance from Iran and Syria are preventing the vast majority of moderates within the CIC from taking a leadership role. If the extremists are not dealt with immediately, both politically and militarily, they will further consolidate their control over the CIC, overthrow the TFG and threaten the security of the neighboring states. Meles said IGASOM is important and expressed his appreciation to the U.S. for coordinating with the EU in getting IGASOM approved by the UNSC. Meles observed that it will take time for IGASOM to become established. He questioned what states would participate, especially facing a hostile CIC which opposes IGASOM. But once IGASOM is operational, he added, it will play a crucial role protecting the TFG, forcing the CIC to negotiate with the TFG in a serious manner and boost hopes for moderates to take over the CIC.

17. (C) Meles underscored that to support IGASOM's formation, it will be necessary for Ethiopia and other troops to take short military actions against the extremist elements of the CIC. This will keep them "off-balance" and send a clear message that the regional states will not tolerate extremists holding any position of authority in the CIC. Once this message has been conveyed, Meles believes that IGASOM will have a better chance to succeed.

18. (C) In a separate meeting (Ref A), TFG Prime Minister Gedi told us that the CIC had issued an assassination list against him and several other TFG leaders. It was a clear indication that the CIC and its foreign supporters seek to overthrow the TFG. While the TFG fully supports IGASOM, Gedi, unlike Meles, was not forthcoming in dialoguing with the CIC.

#### Internal Challenges:

19. (C) At the same time, Meles faces serious challenges. Ethnic tensions are increasing as reflected by replacements of some Amharic and Oromo military leaders with Tigrayan officers loyal to Meles, and widening the political divide

among ethnic groups. Ethiopia heads into local elections in April 2007 with facing uncertain prospects for participation by both opposition candidates and voters. While progress is being made in negotiations over release/pardons of prominent opposition leaders detained since November 2005, participation by opposition parliamentarians in the political process, and forward movement on political reform in the Parliament and media openness, the open dialogue between the government and the opposition has recently stalled.

Comment:

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¶10. (C) The Embassy continues to push the government on reform and work with the opposition in advocating a dialogue between them and the government. We are also supporting efforts to negotiate the release of CUD and associated detainees, and are pushing for greater economic and political reforms. Significant progress has been made, but the focus on the security threat from extremists in Somalia and the involvement of Eritrea and support from other foreign groups are diverting attention from democratic reforms to national security. Working with the government on both tracks will be challenging and faced with many obstacles. To support stability in the region and ease Ethiopian anxieties, it will be necessary to take the following actions:

- get an effective IGASOM force up and running quickly to defend the TFG and force the CIC to dialogue seriously;
- Solicit the support of African and Arab leaders to push for moderation by the CIC and advocate a dialogue; (AU Chairman Konare remarked that too many leaders recognized the threat of extremism in Somalia but have been silent. Their voices will be important in supporting the TFG and moderation within the CIC.)
- Support Somaliland and Puntland and their efforts to resist extremism;
- Greater international support for institution-building and dialogue in Somalia;
- Greater international outcry against extremist/terrorist

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groups and their foreign supporters, particularly those nations cited in the UN report;  
-- Condemnation of Eritrea for expanding its war against Ethiopia. (Senator Feingold questioned why the Administration has been silent on Eritrean human rights violation and military activities to destabilize the region. We suggested to the Senator that Congress can also take a role in highlighting Eritrean misdeeds.) End Comment.  
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